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ABSTRACT

A course in teaching reading designed for prospective English teachers is described. The first activity of the course is a study of statistics concerning reading achievement on local, state, and national levels. Students in the course are urged to visit their own high schools or local schools as individual projects for studying reading achievement and reading programs. Based on their research students discuss rationales for reading programs, and, ultimately, the nature of the reading process. Implications of these discussions for English teachers in the classroom are presented. Specific reading skills such as word perception, literal comprehension, and inferential comprehension are discussed. Evaluation and diagnosis of reading ability and material selection for teaching reading are studied in individual projects. Preparation of lessons enable students to see how content and process can be integrated in the classroom. Other topics of discussion include reading flexibility, materials, machines, readability, testing, retardation and remediation, and organization for instruction. The course was taught using a contract system which enabled students to determine at the beginning what grade they would work for and what projects they would complete. (References are included.) (AL)

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There are basically three themes to develop in this presentation, no one of which is very startling.

Prospective English teachers need and should develop some understanding of the process of reading and the relevance of the teaching of reading to the discipline of English.

Prospective English teachers should be shown how to integrate process goals of reading and traditional content goals of language, literature and composition.

Needs of prospective English teachers in the area of reading can be met by providing both instruction common to all students and guidance for individual students wishing to explore in depth some area in which interest is developed during the course.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to a description of one attempt to provide within a pre-service teacher preparation program a semester course based on these three statements.

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Students enrolled in the course being described are usually in their third year. They are almost exclusively English majors with one or two professional courses behind them. Most of them have had at least a week's exploratory field experience within a public school system but little instructional experience otherwise. This last situation is gradually changing, since some students are seeking experience as tutors within their early professional experience.

Why mention these facts? Because they relate specifically to the lack of awareness and knowledge about reading of those enrolled in the course. There is simply little or no awareness of the process of reading, the need for continued development of reading skills, the range of reading achievement which may be expected in a high school classroom, or the secondary teacher's responsibility for considering reading as an integral facet of his teaching. A significant function of the course is the development of such awarenesses and understandings.

Thus, the course begins with a look at local, state-wide, and national statistics. We're fortunate in having available up-to-date data on the reading achievement of several large, medium, and small Maine secondary schools, both junior and senior high. These data have been gathered in several ways; the instructor has convinced local officials of their usefulness and has returned to the university with all-school distributions or grade distributions. Students enrolled

have returned to their own high schools (sometimes to "prove that things aren't that bad" in their high schools) and returned with counselors' agreements to provide data at the instructor's request. Other students, both in the undergraduate course and in a graduate course taught by the instructor, have conducted testing sessions in local school districts as individual projects and returned data for class use.

Discussions evolving from class study of such data are extremely valuable from several viewpoints. Of course, an awareness of range of reading achievement develops. Without too much prompting, this leads to a discussion of scheduling, grouping, appropriateness of materials, readability, and providing for reading needs within the secondary program. Often idealistic statements are sharply tempered by the pragmatic comments of students who know very well that the faculty members with whom they've had experience aren't in any way ready or willing to deal with reading! Another value of studying these data lies in examination of the instruments used in collecting data concerning reading. Still another value lies in relating test content to such questions as: What is the test measuring? What do we want the test to measure? What test will measure what we want measured? What do we do when we can't find...?

The discussion of reading achievement within the high schools of the state not only leads to a discussion of rationales for continuing

reading instruction but also leads, as has already been implied, to a consideration of the question of the nature of the reading process. Students are asked to read widely varying definitions -- Adler, Bacon, Thoreau, Gray, Holmes and Singer, Moffett, Francis Chase, Harris, and so on -- and to write their own definitions. Without fail, the result of this assignment has been consternation, frustration, and a gradually dawning conclusion that reading is not unlike intelligence -- it's not understood, it's complex, it's variously defined, and it's a classic illustration of Lewis Carroll's famous line: When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.

Students are also asked to consider the implications of their growing awareness of the reading process. What implications does this growing awareness have for them as readers? As students? As teachers of English? The results of these discussions are not always immediately successful early in the course but a beginning is made and such discussions are continued throughout the semester.

An integral part of developing awareness of the nature of the process of reading is discussion of word perception, literal comprehension, and inferential comprehension. In each of these areas students are shown what skills are included, where lists of these skills are located, what techniques are commonly used to teach some of these skills, the significance of questioning, and how achievement is commonly

evaluated; then they're asked to apply these new learnings to content from their discipline. A series of three assignments completed by the students usually demonstrates that the same material may be used for various purposes and that process skills may be developed simultaneously with content learning.

It's been this instructor's experience that it takes a long time to develop student understanding that teaching students reading skills is as significant a goal of a secondary program as the more traditional content goals. These assignments, as well as the directed activities which follow, are used to demonstrate to students that these skills can be taught at the same time that the literary content is being presented. Students have developed some stellar lessons integrating content and reading skills. Characterization by anecdote is developed along with understanding main ideas supported by details; appositives are developed as context clues; hyperbole is taught as critical reading, and its purpose is discussed; the language of poetry is used to teach the significance of background of experience in reading.

What's suggested here, of course, is the idea that reading skills can be seen to be a way of helping students get the literary content teachers assign and that spending time helping youngsters develop these skills is not outside the realm of the English teacher's responsibility. As Bader wrote recently, "The goal is to produce content area teachers

who will not see reading instruction as an added burden, or a remedial chore, but as an integral part of their effectiveness as instructors." (1)

After viewing a 48-minute directed lesson taught by the instructor and after experiencing as students one or two similar lessons in class, students are assigned two such lessons -- one using common content and the other content of their choice. Both these lessons are seen as vehicles for teaching the possibilities of multiple uses of content for varying purposes and the possibilities of integrating process and content. Evaluation is carefully considered in the preparation of these lessons.

When students have demonstrated competence in preparing such activities, we move into a series of discussions about the following topics: reading flexibility, materials, machines, readability, testing, retardation and remediation, and organization for instruction. It should be stressed here that students are simply introduced to these topics, made aware of some broad understandings, shown the literature, and given a series of the traditional Caveat magister.

The third theme is related not so much to the content as to the conduct of the course. While it may be an indefensible and old-fashioned concept, the instructor holds to the belief that students enrolled in an introductory course should be exposed to what the philosophers might call some "minimum essentials." Thus all students are asked to complete assignments demonstrating that they've given some thought to the nature

of reading, the preparation of skills lessons, the integration of process and content, the examination of materials, and the evaluation of reading tests. Satisfactory completion of these assignments fulfills the instructor's requirements in "minimum essentials" and leads to the award of a C grade in the course.

Students who are motivated to do more than complete the minimum requirements--whether for grades or for reasons of interest and concern--are given the opportunity. Series of assignments have been established and described so that at the outset of the course the student can choose the level at which he wishes to work and can--soon after he enrolls--commit himself by contract to working toward average or honor grades. Work beyond the minimum essentials is recognized in the only way we can currently work within the university system--with honors grades.

The contract system has worked very well in this course, and the instructor is very quick to attribute excellent student morale to a system in which students can do their own thing at the same time that they know early in the game what's expected of them. Each assignment is carefully described; types of projects are discussed; each student confers with the instructor while planning the nature of his individual work; only when the student is well aware of what's expected of him does he contract to do an individual project and commit himself to a specific level of work leading to grades of A or B.

Just one or two comments on this contract system. Students have been very positive in their reactions. In student evaluations the most frequent comment has been, "It's great to know what's expected." Students appreciate the written assignments, and some even begin to see implications for their own teaching. But probably the most significant comment is that interested students have an early opportunity to plan individual projects--whether papers, testing sessions, tutoring sessions--and carry them on during the semester. Obviously these can contribute significantly to class discussion as well as to individual growth in learning.

And a last comment--if one adopts such a contract system, it's the belief of both this instructor and his students that obligations need to be described in detail. While this takes work and editing, it's worth it. It answers lots of questions, saves lots of time, and gives students criteria for performance as well as a sense of personal responsibility for decisions regarding their own contribution to learning in the course.

1. Bader, Lois A. "Preparing Future Secondary Teachers in Reading," Journal of Reading, 15 (April, 1972), 495.